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A Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns:
Aristotle's Realism and Modern Skepticism

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It is commonly known that Aristotle takes it as apparently unproblematic that we have knowledge of external objects and that he is quick to eschew any radical form of skepticism. Truth for Aristotle is like the proverbial door that no one can fail to hit. It is equally well known that Hume believed that we have no access to the world outside us beyond our internal impressions and ideas. Though there is certainly debate as to how radical a skeptic Hume was, it is certain that as concerns theoretical philosophy, he is a skeptic. Modern skepticism of which Hume was the paradigm representative was the culmination of issues that arose in modern philosophy under the influence of Descartes’ Meditations. From the perspective of Hume’s arguments Aristotle’s view may appear quite naïve. I want to argue that in fact Aristotle’s view is not at all naïve and that it only looks so from the perspective of modern approaches to epistemological questions, i.e., that epistemology is an attempt to get out from “inside” our minds to something “outside.” In the course of doing this, I want to argue that a more fundamental disagreement between Aristotle and Hume lies at the bottom of their differing appraisals of mind’s ability to know the world. This disagreement ultimately lies in their differing views about what it is for an object to affect the mind and, more generally, in their differing views about what it means for any object to affect another. I believe this disagreement is ultimately at the root of their further disagreements about what is given to consciousness, the very notion of an “inside” and “outside” of mind, and ultimately the very foundation of their approaches to any understanding of experience.

Aristotle’s De Anima is, as is suggested by its title, a discussion of soul, but it is equally a discussion of knowledge. This is clear once one gets into the text and realizes that the bulk of it concerns the sensitive and rational aspects of the human soul, i.e., human understanding. For the present purposes, I am going to focus upon Aristotle’s analysis of the role of perception within human understanding and specifically its relation to the object of perception. Their are many aspects of Aristotle’s theory of perception that for lack of space I shall not be discussing in any depth though they are certainly important for a complete and adequate understanding of Aristotle’s theory of perception. I am here thinking of the relation between the special senses, e.g., sight, touch, hearing, etc. and the common sensorium. Though I will not discuss this specific but important issue I think that what I have to say about the affect of the object of perception upon the soul will still hold true.

Aristotle’s analysis of the ability of external objects to affect the soul is a more restricted application of his understanding of affection in general as presented in the Physics and On Generation and Corruption. Crucial to Aristotle’s view is that all affection, i.e., all movement or alteration, is a complex unity. That is, affection is not primarily a relation existing between two distinct objects, i.e., an agent and a patient. Rather, affection is a unified whole for which the agent and patient are but separate “parts” of a single actualization, i.e., the movement itself. In other words, movement is a unity realized in the actualization of the agent as potentially moving and the patient as potentially being moved. Or, once again, the agent as moving and the patient as being moved are one qua the actualization that is the movement. This is clearly laid out in Physics, book III, chapter 3, where Aristotle says,

The solution of the difficulty that is raised about the motion - whether it is in the movable - is plain. It is the fulfillment of this potentiality, and by the action of that which has the power of causing motion; and the actuality of that which has the power of causing motion is not other than the actuality of the movable, for it must be the fulfillment of both. A thing is capable of causing motion because it can do this, it is a mover because it actually does it. But it is on the movable that it is capable of acting. Hence there is a single actuality of the both alike, just as one to two and two to one are the same interval, and the steep ascent and the steep descent are one - for these are one and the same, although they can be described in different ways. So it is with the mover and the moved.1

Yet, as Aristotle points out, some will say that it is contrary to reason if we suppose that there is “one identical actualization of two things which are different in kind.” For if movement is one identical actualization of agent and patient then the agent in acting on the patient will itself be acted upon. For example, if teaching and learning are one identical actualization then the teacher in teaching the learner will in fact also be learning. Aristotle’s answer to this objection is informative. First he answers that it is not absurd that the actualization of one thing should be in another. For “teaching is the activity of a person who can teach, yet the operation is performed on some patient - it is not cut adrift from a subject, but is of A on B.” Aristotle is fully cognizant of the difference between a mere succession of objects without an internal connection and movement which requires that the agent in acting act on something, i.e., the patient or subject. No external connection will account for this either since this too implies that the action will be “cut adrift” from its subject. That is, there will be a third thing between agent and patient that connects them and will be the proper subject of the agent’s action. In this case it will be the thing between the agent and patient which will act on the patient rather than the original agent. A similar problem will arise with regard to this third thing acting on the patient. That is, is there an internal connection between it and the patient or yet another intermediate? And so on. The internal connection between the agent and patient is the unity of actualization that the movement realizes.

However, this leads to the question of what then is the difference between agent and patient? Is movement a complete identification of agent and patient? Aristotle says no, “There is nothing to prevent two things having one and the same actualization, provided the actualizations are not described in the same way, but are related as what can act to what is acting.” Aristotle’s claim that agent and patient are the same in actualization though described differently should not be taken to mean that there is a mere difference in verbal description between the two, rather there is a difference in definition between the two and thus a difference in essence and being between agent and patient. That is, though in the activity of affection there is one identical actualization of both agent and patient, they still differ with regard to their being. The being of the agent and patient differ in a number of respects, i.e., in definition and also in the potentialities they possess. For example, in the act of building, Aristotle says that the builder building is the building being built. The builder building and the building being built share one identical actualization. However, the definition and essence of the builder is different from that of the building being built. The builder and building being built have different potentialities both before and after the building is built. The most obvious difference is that the builder has the potentiality to build yet what is built, e.g., a house, has not the potentiality to build and never did.

Most importantly though, Aristotle emphasizes the ultimate unity achieved in movement, For it is not things which are in a way the same that have all their attributes the same, but only such as have the same definition. But indeed it by no means follows from the fact that teaching is the same as learning, that to learn is the same as to teach, any more than it follows from the fact that there is one distance between two things which are at a distance from each other, that the two vectors AB and BA are one and the same. To generalize, teaching is not the same as learning, or agency as patiency, in the full sense, though they belong to the same subject, the motion.

That is, agency and patiency are moments of the same subject, the motion itself. As Aristotle argues in On Generation and Corruption, this provides the middle ground that reconciles the disputes of earlier thinkers as to whether like is unaffected by like or vice-versa. It is important to note before we proceed to Aristotle’s analysis of objects affecting the soul that there is no possibility given Aristotle’s theory that in an act of affection the agent and patient or the cause and effect are radically dissimilar. In other words, the agent can only act by realizing the proper corresponding potentiality already present in the patient.

From this general discussion of movement there is a natural transition to Aristotle’s discussion of perception in De Anima which is a specific case of motion, “...for perceiving, and also both thinking and knowing, are, on their own assumption, ways of being affected or moved.” Since perception is the activity

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2 Physics, 202b1.
3 Physics, 202b5-6.
4 Physics, 202b7-9.
5 Physics, 202b13-20.
6 De Anima, 410a25.
of objects in moving the soul by means of the sensitive faculties, then the act of perception is the identical 
actualization of the object perceived and the soul perceiving. That is, qua act of perception there is nothing 
intermediate between the object perceived and the perceiving soul such as a representation or impression 
that realizes the connection between the two. There is rather a qualitative identity between the two. That 
is, for Aristotle, there is no absolute distinction or radical dissimilarity between external objects and their 
affections in the soul, but rather a unity between them. This point, however, is not the result of "epistemological" considerations but is a consequence of Aristotle's understanding of movement in 
general. A Human being (and a human soul) is a thing in the world and is, like every other natural thing, 
affected by things. Because of the very nature of affection the soul can be affected by things in an 
unmediated fashion. Perception is but one kind of affection of the soul, namely, objects affecting the soul 
by means of the sensitive faculties.

This I think brings up a whole host of issues that are of interest to our modern epistemological 
sensibilities. I want to focus on one especially relevant issue. For Aristotle, there is no "absolute" 
distinction between the "inside" and "outside" of consciousness although the origin of this more modern 
distinction can be understood as an intensification of aspects of Aristotle's own theory. Aristotle does 
speak both of an external object of perception and says that perception takes place in the soul. However, 
what he means by this must be understood in the context of his general discussion of affection. As we saw, 
the agent acting and the patient being acted upon are identically actualized in activity. But, this does not 
mean the agent and patient are identical per se since they have different definitions and differ in their being. 
More specifically, the object perceived is not identical per se to the perceiving subject for they have 
different definitions and differ in being. The object perceived is in many (and perhaps most) cases not 
capable of perception though the perceiving subject is of necessity capable of perception. Similarly, what 
is being built is not capable of building though the builder is. Because of this, there is a real sense in which 
the object of perception is external to the soul in the sense that it is not part of the soul. At the same time, 
however, the object perceived cannot realize one of its real potentialities without the soul. That is, just as 
the builder cannot realize his or her real potentiality to build without something to build the object cannot 
realize its real potentiality to be perceived without the soul. In this sense, the soul makes possible a 
perfection of objects, namely, that they be perceived and ultimately known. In a way this sounds somewhat 
odd since we typically think of perceiving and knowing to be merely a fulfillment of the soul, but for 
Aristotle the world "needs" to be understood just as much as we need to understand it. The world wants, 
antropomorphically speaking, to manifest its ultimate rationality but it needs us in order to do so. What 
this ultimately means is that Aristotle does not fit straightforwardly into either division of the 
realism/idealism divide. He is not a realist because objects are actualized only in conjunction with the soul 
and at the same time he is not an idealist because there is a real sense in which objects are external to the 
soul or mind.

Thus, there is a perfectly intelligible sense in which the objects perceived are external to and 
different than the soul perceiving them. On the other hand, Aristotle says that perception happens in the 
soul. Though what he means by this is that the objects perceived as perceived do not themselves perceive 
by this act of perception. Thus, when one perceives Athens, Athens is not thereby perceiving itself. So 
there is a real and intelligible sense in which perception is in the soul, namely, it is the soul which is 
perceiving. But both the externality of the perceived object and the internality of perception must be 
understood within the context of Aristotle's general discussion of affection.

Stripped of this context and its emphatic emphasis upon the unity of actualization of the agent and 
patient in affection, the externality of the perceived object and internality of perception in the soul can 
become intensified to the point that the object perceived and the perception of it become two increasingly 
distinct and dissimilar things. Because of this there arises the epistemological problem that is more familiar 
to us, namely that knowledge is somehow reaching out beyond the mere contents of our mind to the 
external world. For Aristotle this is a non-issue since the very distinction that generates it is unwarranted. 
The apparent self-evidence we find in this modern problematic is I think a large part of the reason that 
Aristotle's trust in perception seems naive to many, when in fact it certainly is not. 

I believe, however, that this modern problematic is not directly the result of a different conception 
of affection or a simple forgetfulness of Aristotle's analysis of perception. Although certainly both of these 
did occur, at the root of the modern epistemological problematic is a metaphysical thesis that for modernity 
was articulated most explicitly by Descartes. This is the radical distinction between mental things and non-
mental things, e.g., the contents of mind on the one hand and its objects on the other. As Descartes notes,
Among my thoughts, some are, as it were, the images of things, and it is to those alone that the name \textit{idea} properly belongs; as when I represent to myself a man, a chimera, the sky, an angel or God himself. Others again, have other forms; as when I will, fear, affirm, or deny, I indeed conceive something as the object of the action of my mind, but I also add something else by this action to the idea that I have of the object.\footnote{Descartes, \textit{Discourse on Method and The Meditations}, tr. F. E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin Books, 1968), pg. 115.}

Given this distinction between the “images of things” and the things themselves it is quite clear that there can be no unproblematic \textit{unity} between the mind and its objects, or more specifically, between the contents of one’s mind (the “images of things”) and its object. They are simply too dissimilar and too distinct, one being a mental being and the other not. What I perceive in this case is “the images of things.” “Perceiving” the thing itself, if this is to make any sense at all, can only mean an inference made from these images about what is producing the images themselves.

And even now I do not deny that these ideas are to be found in me. But there was something further which I affirmed and which, on account of the habit I had of believing it, I thought I perceived very clearly, although in reality I did not perceive it at all, namely, that there were things outside myself from which these ideas came, and to which they had a perfect resemblance.\footnote{Meditations, pg. 114}

In no case can I perceive things, rather I perceive “images of things” or what is commonly called today “representations.” Given the radical distinction between the contents of mind and its objects, the Aristotelian analysis of perception could no longer be maintained since the unity between the perceived object and the perceiving soul it requires is broken asunder by the intermediary of the image in the mind. Or, put another way, in perception I perceive the image and not the object of which it is the image. On the other hand, Descartes has not completely given up Aristotle’s notion of affection as is evident from the fact that the contents of the mind are still regarded as images and as such must be images of \textit{something}. It is Hume who finally dissolves the last vestiges of Aristotle’s analysis by rejecting the notion of mental “images” and replacing it with the notion of mental “impressions.” After all, since we do not perceive the object why should we call these mental impressions images?

What does seem clear is that, after Descartes the Aristotelian conception of the way in which objects affect the mind becomes increasingly problematic. And one does not have to be a substance dualist for this to be the case. Any view in which the contents of the mind, e.g., representations, impressions, qualia, etc. is radically dissimilar from the objects producing them has the same consequence. Descartes’ division of the world into the radically dissimilar categories of the mental and non-mental requires a new understanding of cause and affect at least insofar as it pertains to the interaction between the world and the mind, if there is to be one at all. What is now required if there is to be causal interactions between these two radically different types of things is a notion of causality and affection that does not require a unity between agent and patient or cause and effect. Causation must be conceived as a \textit{relation} between two fundamentally distinct kinds of things. In saying this I do not mean to suggest that Aristotle’s notion of affection and causation was entering its twilight for other reasons. Certainly there were other reasons. But as far as epistemology was concerned, Descartes sounded its death-knell.

Moreover, as is clear from the above, perception is conceived very differently by Descartes and Aristotle. For Aristotle, perception is merely one type of movement. That is, it is a sensible object moving or acting upon the soul. For Descartes, perception is the mind possessing an image or idea. Perception is no longer a movement, it is a particular state or property of the mind. Perception proper for Descartes amounts to “seeing” an image, he says that “I find these images in my mind.” This requires the notion of an “inner sense” which is alien to Aristotle’s thought, that is a perception of the contents of one’s soul. This is the direct result of an intensification and misunderstanding of Aristotle’s own thesis that perception is in the soul. For Descartes, unlike Aristotle, perception is not a natural occurrence at all, it is rather a mental occurrence.

This new, modern, Cartesian understanding of perception creates a wall between perception and the object that is perceived. Any connection between the inner, mental event of perception and something external requires that a synthesis or judgement be made, namely, that the thing is as it appears to me. The
connection between the perception and its external object is an external connection that holds between two radically distinct things, i.e., the image and the original. This creates the permanent possibility of error in every aspect of perception. Even Aristotle would realize that this understanding of perception and of our ability to know something about the external world by means of it would lead to inextricable doubt. In De Anima and elsewhere, Aristotle clearly recognizes that the kind of synthesis or “quasi-unity” that Descartes proposes between perception and the external world leads inevitably to the permanent possibility of falsehood.

The thinking then of the simple objects of thought is found in those cases where falsehood is impossible: where the alternative of true or false applies, there we always find a putting together of objects of thought in a quasi-unity...For falsehood always involves a synthesis.9

On the other hand, a related account is given by Aristotle of the impossibility of error with regard to the special senses,

Perception of the special objects of sense is never in error or admits the least possible amount of falsehood. That of the concomitance of the objects concomitant with the sensible qualities comes next: in this case certainly we may be deceived; for while perception that there is white before us cannot be false, the perception that what is white is this or that may be false. (More literally: that there is white cannot be in error, but whether the white object is something else can be in error).10

What must be careful in interpreting what Aristotle says here. The inability to be deceived with respect to perception is here not the result of epistemological considerations. That is, Aristotle is not arguing that it is a brute epistemological fact that I cannot be deceived with respect to the way things appear to me, e.g., that I know with certainty that I am “being appeared to whitely,” and that this I cannot doubt. Rather, Aristotle is arguing that, since perception is the unity of actualization of the object perceived and the perceiving of it, there can be no error because in this case there is no synthesis. Error arises when I proceed to judge about the white object that it is something or other. Perceiving white is a unity that essentially includes the object perceived and the perceiver perceiving. The shift in Descartes’ version of this is both subtle and important. Descartes argues that I cannot be in error that I find certain ideas “within me” but in connecting them to anything external to me involves a judgement and, therefore a synthesis, and thus the possibility of error. This produces a whole new realm for skeptical doubt, viz., whether there is any connection between perceiving and the external world at all.

Whereas for Aristotle the starting point of human knowledge is the embodied soul in its interaction with the world, Descartes begins with a disembodied subject which is immediately aware only of its own mental content. Thus arises the epistemological problematic so familiar to us now,

Now, concerning ideas, if they are considered only in themselves, and are not referred to any other thing, they cannot, strictly speaking, be false...Thus there only remain judgements in which I must take very great care not to be mistaken. Now, the principal and most usual mistake that occurs in them consists in my judging that the ideas which are within me are similar in conformity with the things outside me.11

This doubt is grounded ultimately in the fact that what produces these ideas within me may in fact be utterly different than the ideas themselves. In fact, for Descartes this is not only possible, but is in fact always the case if I judge them to be the product of a physical object. For the “image” produced is a mental entity while the object that produced it is a physical entity. Aristotle agrees that in judgements there is room for error, but where there is no judgement as in perception there is no possibility of error because, in these cases, the object perceived is identical with the perceiving of the object, these are just two descriptions of the same thing, namely the movement that is perception.

By the time Hume writes these important disagreements concerning the object as perceived and the perceiving subject are understood entirely from the Cartesian perspective. Hume takes as self-evident

9 De Anima, 430a25-430b1.
10 De Anima, 428a18-22.
11 Meditations, pg. 116.
and obvious everything that Aristotle would not. Namely, that perception consists entirely of internal impressions and that thought is built upon ideas derived from these perceptions,

...my intention never was to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations. For besides that this belongs not to my present purpose, I am afraid, that such an enterprize is beyond the reach of human understanding, and that we can never pretend to know body otherwise than by those external properties, which discover themselves to the senses...This suffices for the conduct of life; and this also suffices for my philosophy, which pretends not to explain the nature and causes of our perceptions, or impressions and ideas.\(^\text{12}\)

And that all causation is a relation between distinct objects,

And indeed there is nothing existent, either externally or internally, which is not to be consider’d either as a cause or an effect; tho’ ‘tis plain there is no one quality, which universally belongs to beings, and gives them a title to that denomination. The idea, then, of causation must be deriv’d from some relation among objects; and that relation we must now endeavour to discover.\(^\text{13}\)

The apparent obviousness and self-evidence of these claims to Hume is certainly the result of not only Descartes’ radical distinction between the mental and non-mental but also the subsequent empiricism of Locke and Berkeley who, though they did not accept Descartes’ substance dualism, still maintained an absolute distinction between the being of mental things and non-mental things. Locke and Berkeley in their different ways hoped to maintain some connection between experience and something other than the individual experiencing subject that would account for the content of experience. Hume rightly rejects these attempts since no inference can be made which will extend our knowledge beyond the contents of experience and in so doing he explicitly brings to the fore a concept of causation very different from Aristotle’s. His conception, he argues, is the only legitimate conception of causality we can have given the nature of the contents of experience. This sense of causality permits no causal efficacy to things external to the mind.

Hume’s understanding of causality is an entirely synthetic one. He famously argues that not only can there be no internal necessary connection between two different impressions, but that for this reason there can also be no internal necessary connection between an impression and some external object which, according to Hume’s own presupposition, never appears before me at all. Impressions appear before me but never external objects. It is thus pure speculation to inquire into what produced these impressions or ideas. Or more exactly, it is really a mistaken judgement, and thus a synthetic construction of the mind, that there is any such connection. Once Hume delves deeper into what causation is, rightly understood according to the way in which it is given in immediate experience, we learn that attributing causation to external objects is itself utterly mistaken, a pure fiction. Since causation is the result of the constant conjunction of impressions or ideas and the habit or custom of the mind to believe that the future will resemble the past, there is no possibility of there properly being a causal connection between external objects and internal impressions since there can be no constant conjunction built up between an external object that never appears to us and internal impressions in our minds.

Hume argues that the very notion of an external object is not, therefore, the result of reflection upon causation in general or more specifically that form of causation that Aristotle believed perception to be, i.e., the affective power of perceivable objects upon sentient beings. Rather, Hume argues that our notion of an external existent is based on our habit of imposing uniformity upon ultimately distinct impressions. The mind is accustomed to posit something external to consciousness so that it can unify different impressions into a coherent whole. This too is in the end a synthetic construction of consciousness since the object itself never appears to consciousness in such a way that it can be analyzed but rather is merely the minds collecting together of different impressions into an external synthetic whole. In Hume we have a complete reworking of the very notion of causation from the perspective of the modern epistemological problematic of the internality of the subject and the radical dissimilarity between its internal contents and external objects, if there be any such thing.


\(^\text{13}\) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, pg. 75.
Ironically, the modern notion of causality which allows for a causal relation between two radically
dissimilar things is precisely the one it needs in order to maintain some causal connection between the
mental and non-mental. As I have argued, the Aristotelian notion of affection, which requires a single
identical actualization of both the object perceived and the perceiving of it, could not hold between two
such different things. Unfortunately, any attempt to use the modern notion of causality to salvage a
connection between external objects and internal mental contents must face the obstacle that Hume saw so
clearly, namely, that cause and effect, agent and patient, need share no internal connection which allows
one to pass from one to the other or allows for any understanding of the cause by means of its effect. What
we are left with is purely external synthetic judgements which essentially include the permanent possibility
of error.

For Aristotle, the philosophical work in understanding perception and the relation between the
external object and the perceiving subject is not in proving that there is such a possibility but in analyzing
what this amounts to given that it does happen. This is the sense in which the truth is like the proverbial
door that no one can fail to hit,

Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to
hit, in this respect it must be easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the
particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it.\textsuperscript{14}

The difficulty is in analyzing the parts of the whole. The whole of it in the particular case under discussion
is that perception is an ultimate unity of perceived and perceiver. An analysis of this is what is difficult.
The analysis, furthermore, is not a division of the whole into its constitutive elements in such a way that the
whole could be merely reconstituted out of these elements, but rather an analysis according to the four
causes, potentiality and actuality, and all the other metaphysical tools of understanding that are laid out in,
among other places, the \textit{Physics} and the \textit{Metaphysics}. This analysis can only take place given the context
of the overriding unity of actualization that makes all its moments intelligible. For example, agent and
patient cannot be understood separately from the unity of affection or movement of which they are the
agent and patient. For this reason, the analysis of perception in \textit{De Anima} is itself a complex and difficult
endeavor, but our understanding of it is a process of analysis rather than synthesis. The whole is given and
what is necessary is a philosophical analysis of its moments. For example, earlier I had said that perception
is a movement in which the object of perception moves the soul by means of the senses. In this case, one
may interpret this as implying that perception is realized when the object directly moves the senses and, in
turn, the senses move the soul. This is not the case for Aristotle because in this case it is the senses that the
soul perceives as they are the only thing properly affecting the soul. Rather, for Aristotle the senses are one
part of the material cause of the movement of perception. On the other hand, the formal cause of the
movement of perception is the actualization realized in this material cause, namely the identity of the
perceived object and perceiving subject. An analogy helps to make this clear. The builder builds by means
of the bricks used in the building. This does not mean that the builder builds simply by moving bricks and
then the building being built is the result of the bricks movement. Rather, the builder building is the
building being built and this is accomplished \textit{in part} by the moving of the bricks (as material cause), but the
moving of the bricks can only be properly understood within the totality of that movement that is the
building of the building itself.

In sum, for Aristotle, the object as perceived and the subject as perceiving can only be understood
with respect to the activity of perception itself and the unity it brings about between the perceived object
and perceiving subject. This is a complex unity that requires further analysis and refinement. This unity is
the ground of Aristotle's "realism" with regard to perception. However, if this unity is dissolved into an
external, synthetic connection between two dissimilar things only one of which we have access to, then it is
at best problematic and perhaps impossible for us to discover anything about the other. This is the source
and origin of modern epistemological skepticism.

Random House, 1941), 993b4-5.